

# Commentary: *Timshel* – ‘Thou Mayest’ (or ‘Thou Mayest Not’)

-Michael H. Samuelson

*“...But the Hebrew word, the word timshel, ‘Thou mayest,’ that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if ‘Thou mayest,’ it is also true that ‘Thou mayest not.’ Don’t you see?”*

*~ Lee, John Steinbeck’s character, East of Eden*

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## Introduction

I may...and, then again, I may not. It’s up to me!

What a wonderfully freeing reality it is to know that, indeed, at the moment of decision, you do have a choice. To deny “choice” not only condemns you to victimhood, it also negates all of your positive accomplishments and victories—past, present, and future. For, after all, if rain clouds seek you out for fierce punishment, how can you possibly control the sun?

Yes, of course, there is pain and heartache, but for every dark moment, there lives the potential for a thousand love-filled hours. For every misfortune, there is the possibility of hundreds of reasons to rejoice in the treasures of life. For every physical pain, there may be found countless moments of bliss. For every fear that you may conjure up today, there will forever be the promise of tomorrow.

## Adult Choices and Responsibilities

It’s so very easy to deflect accountability for our actions, to cower in the shadow of our own behavior while we shuffle away murmuring and whimpering, “It’s not my fault, it’s not my fault.”

If you go through the day blaming Mom or Dad (sister, brother, uncle, aunt, the boss, the boy next door, the Gulf War, world hunger, Bill O’Reilly, Michael Moore...) for your poor life choices and their consequences, all that I can say is “Get over it.” You can choose to wallow in self-pity, cling to your persecution blanket and project miserable images of your future, or you can draw lessons from bad experiences and the jerks you’ve met along the way and move forward. It truly is your choice. Sorry for being so blunt, but enough is enough!

Oh, and if you’re going for that third hot dog, keep in mind that it’s simply because you choose to eat another hot dog. If you prefer, you can blame your dear dead grandmother, who fed you cookies, cake, homemade jam, donuts, candy and lots and lots of pasta; nonetheless, you’re the one ordering the third hot dog. And if you’re an alcoholic and can trace it to the tequila shooters you and your dad used to do when you were fifteen, that’s truly tragic. However,

you're a big boy now, and you're still doing shooters with the guys. So now whose responsibility is it to push away from the bar?

## Five Critical Lessons of Choice

In my thirty plus years as a parent, teacher, counselor, trainer, business leader, cancer patient, world traveler, and researcher, I've learned five critical rules for dealing with choice:

1. Respect the power of self-fulfilling prophecy.
2. Pain and suffering: know which is the teacher and which is the leech.
3. In the process of *becoming*, don't forget to simply *be*.
4. Choose wisely when it comes to happiness and pleasure.
5. Victim or master? It's all up to you.

## Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

This is by far the most powerful force in human behavior. If you believe something strongly enough, and if that something is within the realm of possibility, you will do everything possible to make sure it happens. It's that simple, and that powerful.

What happens is that you begin to see, hear, and feel the predicted outcome—good or bad. You write the script; you rehearse the basic movements; you position the other actors, adjust the lighting, and yell, "Action!" I have watched brilliant students fail and marginally gifted students rise to the top. I've watched "terminal" cancer patients live more than fifteen years beyond medical expectations, and I've watched patients with a high probability of long-term survival die shortly after telling me they would. I've seen physically gifted athletes fail to reach their potential and physically average kids break records. I've listened while individuals accurately predicted doomed marriages, tanked jobs, and lost children. To make matters even worse, the wizards who accurately forecast gloom and doom actually seem to take perverse pride in their ability to predict their failures. Their mantra is "See, I told you so!"

If you find yourself surrounded by people who use this power in a negative way, I caution you to be very careful. They are on a mission, and you may well be part of the script. Instead, surround yourself with people who start with positive possibilities, nurture them into probabilities, and then bask in the wonderful realities they create.

Listen to your self-talk and scrutinize the film clippings running through your mind. Are you creating storyboards for a disaster movie or a heroic tale of success and accomplishment?

## Pain and Suffering

Physical and emotional pain are part of life and, unless self-inflicted, beyond our control. Pain is usually temporary; it often serves a diagnostic purpose. A persistent pain in the belly warns of a problem that needs attention. Acknowledging the emotional pain of losing a loved one is part of the healing process. Having been on the receiving end of both kinds of pain, I know that pain

can, at times, be unbearable, requiring medication and lots of support.

Although the words “pain” and “suffering” are often used interchangeably, there is a difference. Pain is a specific emotional or physical reaction to an actual event. I stub my toe, it hurts; her boyfriend leaves her, it hurts; his child is ill, it hurts. And when it comes to emotional pain, flashback moments may pop up years after the actual event. At that moment, the pain is just as real as it was years before.

Suffering, on the other hand, is characterized by its all-consuming presence, tenacity, and debilitating impact (“It’s been five years since my boyfriend left me and it still hurts, every day. I’ll never find anyone else”). Sometimes the obsessive reaction is based solely on conjecture or fabrication (“If only I hadn’t taken this job.” “My parents ruined my life.” “Nobody will ever understand me.” “Things could have been different, if only...”). Pain is involuntary; suffering is by choice. Pain can have value, but “Woe is me!” suffering sucks you dry and then moves on to another victim.

Let’s take a horrific example: the death of a child. Now, please understand that, being a parent myself, I cannot think of anything that could be more painful than this. The sorrow would be indescribable; it would go on for months, then return to pierce the heart at intervals throughout life. However, healthy parents, no matter how intense the pain, eventually move on with their lives, carrying with them both sad and joyful memories. They smile again, even laugh. They’re never quite the same, but clearly, they choose to live.

If they cannot move past their daily obsessive sorrow, and if the pain stretches on for years, parents are actively contributing to their ongoing grief. They have every right to do this. However, at this point, either their suffering is by choice or they have a serious illness that needs professional attention.

Okay, that’s the extreme case. But how about you? Are you choosing to carry baggage from years ago? Obsessing over events, conversations, or missed opportunities? If you are, there’s no question that you’re suffering and that suffering can cause real pain. However, please understand that nobody can relieve that suffering but you. You’re choosing to let it drag you down and interfere with your life. This is your right. But, is this what you truly want?

Of course, it’s not as simple as snapping your fingers and wishing the suffering away. But, the first step is to wrestle back control and start thinking differently. Re-read the section on self-fulfilling prophecy. If you believe strongly enough that change is possible, you will do all that is in your power to make it so. If, on the other hand, you sincerely believe that it is your destiny to suffer—guess what?

## Less Becoming and More Being

In “The Wizard of Oz”, it takes a storm and a good knock on the head to make Dorothy realize that life’s real treasures are not found at the end of a yellow brick road. In fact, as Dorothy discovers, you never even have to leave home! No need for long journeys, strange companions, favors from Munchkins, fights with flying monkeys, witches of any kind, great

sacrifices, and all-knowing wizards. All you have to do is open your eyes and look all around you!

Here's a nice irony: our favorite part of the movie is really Dorothy's big mistake. How she longs to travel "over the rainbow"! Hey, folks, put away the hankies! Remember the guy behind the curtain? The treasure is the rainbow! And the answers lie in the journey, not at the end of the yellow brick road. For those who pay attention, the answers are on the road, and in the scenery alongside the road. Open your eyes, enjoy it, and quit spending your time running from the witch's cackle and chasing imaginary pots of gold. Life is in front of you—today, this moment. (And that includes your little dog, too!)

Many people spend so much time seeking the great and powerful Oz that they miss the wonders and magic of life's journey. When they eventually discover that it's only the charlatan, Professor Marvel, behind the curtain, it's often too late. Their health is ruined, they're sleeping with strangers, and their children have grown up and moved away—emotionally as well as physically. In their quest to become, they forgot to be.

There is a distinct difference between those who mark time in years and those who mark time in moments: those who check off years miss the journey. Freeze-framed moments have independent value. They are complete in and of themselves, requiring little more than our presence and focus. Look at your little girl's smile and then name your selling price. What would tempt you to trade away even one hug from a grandchild? Is there a stock with market value equal to a photo album filled with family memories?

In contrast, a life of constant guilt, blame and pursuit consumes enormous amounts of physical resources and emotional energy. The reward? Bitterness and perishable hard goods. And this life of years has a perpetually moving end point. Eventually it does end—at its own pleasure, not yours.

Here are a few questions to ponder: Are you running down some path so fast that you've forgotten why you're running? Do you push aside gold as you reach for tin? Do you realize you have a choice? Oh yes, you do have a choice. Some of you are just too busy blaming others, chasing pots of gold, or trying to figure out how to get over the next rainbow, to notice. As Dorothy once asked the Scarecrow, "What would you do with a brain, if you had one?"

Sorry for that last snide question. It's just that I've seen too many nice Scarecrows get torched.

## Happiness or Pleasure? Your Choice

When I was a kid going to Catholic school in the 1950s, there was a high premium placed on suffering. The more you suffered, the faster you washed away your sins. If your account was in good shape, you could shift the value of your suffering over to some poor soul in Purgatory, who would then get some time knocked off his sentence. You were reinforced for choosing to suffer!

If you went around too long with a smile on your face, the nuns suspected the worst. “What have you been up to, Michael?” asks Sister Mary Louise.

“Nothing, Sister,” I reply.

“Well, then,” says the good Sister, “Wipe that smile off your face.”

“Yes, Sister. Sorry, Sister.”

If signs of happiness brought scrutiny, outright displays of pleasure put you directly on a paved road to Hell. Or at least guaranteed you a long term in Purgatory. Then it would be your turn to depend on some nice kid offering up really good suffering to reduce your sentence.

In spite of a series of Sister Marys, I grew up pretty happy, and I’m still happy. I probably have more than my fair share of pleasure, as well. The important thing is to know the difference between happiness and pleasure and when to choose one over the other.

Happiness is strictly a state of mind. It is subjective. What makes me happy may or may not make you happy. However, as long as the source of my happiness is not pathological, it is a desirable state and for the most part benefits everyone around me. When I’m happy, I have more energy, I’m fun to be around, and I tend to be more generous than when I’m not happy. My being happy is a good thing.

Pleasure is also good. It may contribute to my overall happiness, or it may not. It’s important to think about this before submitting to temptation. Here’s a simple example: Is eating a piece of chocolate cake pleasurable? Yes, certainly. Will it bring me happiness? Yes, I think so. Can’t hurt. Well then, how about a whole cake? Will eating a whole cake be pleasurable? Sure. But, will it bring me happiness? Nope. The feeling of pleasure will quickly wear off, and I’ll be left with regret, awakened fat cells, and a nasty sugar crash. Here’s another: Will paying my taxes bring me pleasure? Not a chance. Will it contribute to my overall happiness? Yes, I will have kept the IRS off my back for another year.

Simple examples, but you get my point. Next time you’re facing a choice with serious consequences, ask yourself: Will this choice make me happy? If it also brings you pleasure, that’s a bonus! If it brings pleasure but is a threat to your happiness, proceed with great caution. Better yet, sit down, have a piece of chocolate cake, and think long and hard before you proceed. If you don’t, you may need a whole bunch of nice kids with clean slates willing to suffer on your behalf.

## Victim or Master: Again, Your Choice

“It’s not my fault.” “He did it.” “Nobody tells me anything.” “Why me?” “I can’t help it.” “If you had to work with my boss...” “If you had to live with...” “You don’t know my mother.” And on and on and on.

This kind of talk and attitude leads to the most destructive form of self-fulfilling prophecy:

personal scripts painted with the broad brush of failure.

It's the song of the classic whiner, the one who seeks out pathos and proudly wears his victim badge. As long as he can find someone to blame, he can live in the past and never take responsibility for his actions. You know him; we all do.

Once you become a whiner, you'll find it hard to break away from the victim mentality. You've got lots of companionship, because it's such a large club. You never have to look far to find other whiners. Water coolers, talk shows, airplanes, bars, bowling alleys—everywhere you turn, you'll find someone ready to complain about how life just ain't fair. It's the new national pastime.

Yes, there are injustices, inequities, repression, and suppression. If this is your history, I am truly sorry that you have experienced trauma and pain. You have a right to express your anger, frustration, and hurt. I also recognize your need to curl up in a dark corner now and then and lick your wounds. Licking your wounds is healthy and natural—but don't take off all the skin and leave open sores. And don't make it a lifestyle; you'll be miserable, and so will everyone around you.

Recognize your role in creating potentially distressing situations. Constantly blaming others, including the universe, will eventually alienate you from your friends, family, and co-workers. You have plenty of control over how you react to challenges. Refusing to accept accountability suggests that you don't have control over your life. This makes you vulnerable to distress.

In researching and writing the book "Voices from the Edge," I had the privilege and honor of meeting and becoming friends with a lot of folks in the cancer community. Many of them are patients experiencing horrific pain and living with the knowledge that today's sunset might be their last. None, however, consider themselves victims. They are survivors, committed to squeezing out every sweet drop of life that they can. One, Tim Harbour, was told twenty-two years before he died that he had eighteen months to live. Obviously, Tim had other plans. In pain? Oh yes. Disabled from multiple surgeries? Yes. Depressed and frustrated? Sometimes. Looking for sympathy? Don't you dare!

You see, every day that he lived, Tim chose to be the master, not the victim. And, while his body was losing the physical battle, his spirit, his soul, remained in control until his last dying breath. This is freedom.

Watch Jerry Springer; then switch off the tube and think about real life. Think about Tim, or someone like Tim. Now decide: whose camp do you wish to join—Jerry's or Tim's?

**Timshel: It's your choice.**